DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 368 006 CS 508 515

AUTHOR O'Keefe, Virginia
TITLE How To Help Adult and Nontraditional Students Find Success through the Communication Course.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (79th, Miami Beach, FL, November 18-21, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Students; Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Apprehension; *Communication Problems; Communication Research; Course Content; Higher Education; *Introductory Courses; *Nontraditional Students; *Sex Differences; Student Attitudes; *Student Needs; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS Student Surveys

ABSTRACT

Communication courses have a unique role to play in the education of the adult or nontraditional student in a community college. Because these classes are often one of the introductory courses and academic success may, to a large extent depend on the ability to use oral communication skills in the classroom. Communication courses provide an opportunity to assess the needs of these students. A survey was made at a suburban community college in the students. A total of 68 students in four communication courses (three introductory courses and one small-group communication course) taught by four different instructors completed surveys. Results indicated that (1) approximately 60% of the sampling were nontraditional students, and 70% of those were nontraditional by virtue of their age; (2) services that were most needed include counseling and extended library and laboratory hours; (3) females rated high the gain in communication skills and their increase in confidence as a result of the communication course, while males ranked the skills of speech giving and "knowledge of communication"; and (4) females wanted more interpersonal practice and help with managing stage fright; males included the technical aspect of video taping. Findings suggest that the introductory course should be more concerned with experiential activities that build practical competence rather than studying theories of communication. Several unnumbered tables of data and the survey instrument are included. Contains 11 references. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 368 006

HOW TO HELP ADULT AND NONTRADITONAL STUDENTS FIND SUCCESS THROUGH THE COMMUNICATION COURSE

Virginia O'Keefe
George Mason University

Paper Presented
Speech Communication Association
Seventy-Ninth Convention
November, 18-21, 1993

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
V. O'Keefe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS508515

HOW TO HELP ADULT AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS FIND SUCCESS THROUGH THE COMMUNICATION COURSE

Dr. Virginia O'Keefe
George Mason University

The communication courses have a unique role to play in the education of the adult or nontraditional student in a community college. First of all, these classes are often one of the introductory courses encountered by the returning student. Through this course, students "try their wings" in an academic setting. They may experience for the first time in a number of years writing their first exam or formal paper, as well as enduring the trauma of the speaking requirements. Second, since academic success may to large extent depend on the ability to use oral communication skills in a classroom setting, the students are in a position to acquire many skills that will assist them elsewhere. Application of communication theory and practice is directly transferable to other settings. Third, the student has a chance to gain self confidence as a learner and to receive positive reinforcement toward the goals that generally motivate adult learners.

Who are these learners? Nationally, their profiles are diverse. There is a broad range of ages, with the majority of students between twenty to forty years old. The average age in community colleges is twenty-nine. The students also represent a disparate social and economic spectrum.

1. 53% are women.
2. 43% of all blacks in higher education.
3. 55% of all Hispanics in higher education.
4. 56% of all Native Americans in higher education.
5. 42% of all Asians in higher education.
6. All socioeconomic levels attend, but the socioeconomic status in community college is a little lower than four-year institutions. (Gabert, 1991, p.22)

The span of abilities is equally diverse. Students enter community college from various backgrounds and levels of preparation. The range of academic quality may be very high to quite low. Nevertheless, the proportion of lower ability students is greater in the community college than in four-year institutions. They also have a wider assortment of motives for going to school than those who choose universities. The following are some that I have encountered.

Sylvia has two children. Her husband has a severe mental illness and is unable to keep a job. She works as a nurse's aid and is pursuing her Associate's degree in nursing to bring financial stability to her family.

Les is attending school full time on an enlisted man's scholarship program to get an Associate's degree in business management. He has a wife and two children.

Lorraine, 37, is a respiratory therapist. She is in the degree program that will enable her to become registered.

Carl failed in a four year college program fourteen years ago. Lately, he has begun to think he would like to get an associate's degree, just to see if he can do it as a challenge. He's selectively choosing courses that interest him.

Elaine, at 25, works in a pre-school and she has decided that if she can get a degree in education, she will fulfill her dream of becoming a kindergarten teacher.

Tim is a security guard. He has a wife and child and is in the law enforcement program that he hopes will enable him to work for the County police force.

Helen is 47. Her children are now on their own and she wants to return to work. She is in refresher courses for secretaries and learning WordPerfect.

Jay, who had worked for two years, decided he wanted to improve his high school grades so that he could get in the college of his choice. Jay was accepted into West Point through his grades and his internship work for a senator.

This diverse population reflects both the challenge and the richness of a community college population. One problem reflected by these vignettes is that not all of these students are transfer students, yet the transfer function is the "bread and butter" for community colleges. Transfer students take more courses, and their courses are generally cheaper to offer than the more technical ones. Nevertheless, the community college is going to be called upon more often to respond to the burgeoning needs of the adult and nontraditional learners. This need is going to call upon a more innovative approach. Increasingly, colleges will find themselves looking at the integration of disciplines, including writing and speaking across the curriculum, and the infusion of critical thinking.

Looking back at the examples of students attending a community college, we can determine which ones are designated adult and nontraditional. Those students who are over twenty-four years of age are considered nontraditional. However, other characteristics also define the nontraditional. Those who are married or who have children are considered nontraditional, as are those who have not attended school for over a year. Thus, all of the above examples are nontraditional. For the purposes of this paper, these categories of nontraditional students will be referred to as adult learners. While the reasons for returning to school may vary, adult learners probably have a common underlying reason for choosing to pursue their education. They often are searching for

meaning in their lives. As they search for meaning, they want to engage in an interaction with other people and with a substantive content. Thus, learning offers a release of the creative spirit. Carl Rogers (1961) wrote that a person is "a stream of becoming, not a finished product...a fluid process, not a fixed and static entity; a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits" (p. 122).

If we want to help adult learners in their desire to "become," then we must try to understand the possible barriers to their success. Because of past experiences which may have been less than successful, because of a fear of failure, or because of lack of familiarity with classroom practices, students may have low self-esteem in the academic setting. They may also face some social fears: what will friends or family think of their attempts to return to school. They may face some real economic problems. How will they pay tuition and grocery or childcare bills? While 70 percent of community college students are part-time students, all adult learners are part-time. They juggle jobs, families, and community responsibilities. Their student role may not be their most important one.

Our task, then, is to help people to learn how to learn. Our goal is to provide adults with skills to become autonomous, self-directed learners. That, of course, is the goal of education with all learners; the imperative is stronger with adults. The society of lifelong learners envisioned by Goal 5 of the America 2000 National Education Goals Panel, and articulated by Robert Hutchins (1968), former president of the University of Chicago, is one that grants learning fulfillment. Adult education is not something separated from the rest of education. Formal schooling is just one small part of a person's lifelong education. Formal schooling should provide, however, the tools that open doors for further discovery. And, if that is the case, that schooling needs to adapt to the ever growing number of students who have the need to "become," rather than the other way around,

Stephen Brookfield (1987) believes that the most significant learning that one does is learning about oneself. Gaining insights into one's own behavior, or values, is the most memorable kind of learning experience. When we change or question previously held assumptions, then we are truly "becoming." It is when we do question that we begin to think critically and stretch our minds. The types of courses that people register for, or the programs of instruction that people select, are only the surface reasons for going to college. The real reason is the desire to make sense of the world and themselves. The potential for learning is tremendous, but it can be hampered if we do not recognize this need for self-direction and assist it.

To encourage lifelong learning, we must assist people who want to break ties with formal education and develop their own

strategies for learning. (Apps, 1981, p.)

Speech communication can uniquely provide for the needs of the adult learner. As an academic course it fulfills degree requirements. As a lifetime skill it can help the self-directed goals of the individual.

Needs Assessment for Adult and Nontraditional Students Survey

In order to understand and to assist those goals, a survey was made at a suburban community college in the East. A total of 68 students were surveyed in four communication classes: three comprehensive introductory classes and one introductory small group class taught by four different instructors. The questions were designed to differentiate whether students were traditional or nontraditional as defined earlier in this paper. Information was elicited to learn which services at the college were most helpful and which services could be improved; what aspects of the communication course were most helpful; what skills should be included; and what aspects of the course were most difficult. A copy of the survey is included at the end of this paper. Some of the major findings of that survey follow.

PROFILE OF STUDENTS

Percentages of Nontraditional Students Versus Traditional
Group A = Traditional
Group B = Nontraditional
n = 68

	Female		Male		Total	
Total	44	65%	24	35%	68	100%
Group A	17	39%	11	46%	28	41%
Group B	27	61%	13	54%	40	59%

Percentage of Nontraditional Students Over Age 24
(Group B = 40)

	Female		Male		Total	
Total	19	70%	10	77%	29	73%
Over 24	9	33%	6	46%	15	38%
Over 34	7	26%	3	23%	10	25%
Over 44	3	11%	1	8%	4	10%
Over 54	0	0	0	0	0	0

Percentage of Nontraditional Students Living With Spouses/Children
(Group B = 40)

Female		Male		Total	
20	74%	9	69%	29	73%

Percentage of Nontraditional Students Returning to School after More Than One Year
(Group B = 40)

	Female		Male		Total	
Total	17	63%	7	54%	24	60%
2-4 Yrs	4	15%	3	23%	7	18%
5-10 Yrs	9	33%	3	23%	12	30%
11-15 Yrs	4	15%	0	0	4	10%
16-20 Yrs	0	0	1	8%	1	2%
Longest Time:	14 Years		20 Years			

Percentage of Nontraditional Students in Degree Programs
(Group B = 40)

Female			Male			Total		
NO	YES		NO	YES		NO	YES	
0	27	100%	2	11	85%	2	38	95%

Percentage of Nontraditional Students Reasons for Communication Course
(Group B = 40)

	Female		Male		Total	
Required:	24	89%	10	78%	34	85%
Personal Choice:	3	11%	3	23%	6	15%
	All 3 who selected Personal Choice listed fear of speaking as most difficult.		1 of 3 who selected Personal Choice listed fear of speaking as most difficult.			

The results of this survey reveal in the profile of the students that approximately 60 percent of the sampling are nontraditional by the definitions given above. Seventy percent are nontraditional by virtue of their age. Of that group, 63 percent are between twenty-five and fifty-four years of age. The largest percentage of students is in the over 24-year group at 38 percent. 73 percent of the nontraditional students live with spouses/partners and/or children. And, 60 percent are returning to school after more than one year's absence. Surprisingly, the largest group in that category, at 30 percent, were those returning

after five to ten years. Many students were nontraditional for multiple reasons.

The significance of this information for planning instruction is multifaceted when we see that 95 percent of the students are in degree programs and 85 percent are in the communication course because it is required. The skills of students who have been absent from the classroom for half a decade are much different from those who have just graduated from high school. While adults have gained experience that will enrich their learning capacity, the particulars associated with studying, completing assignments, and passing exams can present real hurdles to overcome. It is no wonder that the services most needed are counseling. Longer hours in the library and lab are also understandable.

MOST FREQUENT RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT SERVICES

1. What services of this college have been particularly helpful to you as a student?

Female	Male	Total
1. Counseling	1. Counseling	1. Counseling
2. Library	2. Library	2. Library
3. Computer Labs	3. Computer Labs	3. Computer Labs

2. In your opinion, what services, organizations, or activities could be improved to help adult and nontraditional students?

Female	Male	Total
1. Counseling	1. Counseling	1. Counseling
2. Extended hours for Library/Lab	2. Extended hours for Library/Lab	2. Extended hours for Library/Lab
		3. Support services: tutors, child care

Comparison of Responses about Services and Course Benefits

Not many differences in responses about services emerge between male and female respondents. The real differences occur in responses about the communication course. Females and males mention the same benefits, for instance, but the difference in order is significant, especially when we look at the rest of their responses regarding the course's content and difficulty. Females rated high the gain in communication skills and their increase in confidence, whereas males ranked the skills of speech giving and

"knowledge of communication" after fulfilling the degree requirement. Females, too, included that the degree requirement was met with the course as a top choice, but they were more concerned with general communication skills.

MOST FREQUENT RESPONSES ABOUT COMMUNICATION COURSE

1. How has this speech/communication course helped you toward your educational goals?

Female	Male	Total
1. Gained Comm. Skill	1.Required/Credit	1.Required/Credit
2. Required/Credit	2.How to give speeches	2.Gained Comm. Skill
3. Self Confidence	3.Knowledge of Comm.	3.How to give speeches
4. How to give speeches	4.Self Confidence	4.Self Confidence
5. Knowledge of Comm.	5.Gained Comm. Skills	5.Knowledge of Comm.

2. What kinds of knowledge or skills should be included in this speech/communication course to better aid you in your educational goals?

Female	Male	Total
1. More speech practice	1.More speech practice	1.More speech practice
2. More interpersonal practice	2.Video taping	2. More interpersonal practice
3. Managing stage fright		3.Managing stage fright

3.What aspects of this speech/communication course have been particularly difficult for you as a student?

Female	Male	Total
1. Giving a speech	1.Giving a speech	1.Giving a speech
2. Writing Assignments	2.Writing Assignments	2. Writing Assignments
3. Choosing a topic	3.Exam	3.Exam

Note: While standing up and giving a speech, or even speaking to a group was in first place, the proportions are dramatically different. 48 percent of the females found this difficult, but only 15 percent of the males mentioned this problem. 53 percent of traditional females ranked giving a speech most difficult, only 18

percent of traditional males mentioned this problem.

Comparison of Responses aabout Course Improvement and Difficulty

More speech practice is included by both male and females as a suggestion for course improvement. Females want more interpersonal practice and help with managing stage fright. Males include the technical aspect of video taping. When we look at the last category, however, it becomes apparent where the males and females view the course requirements differently. Nearly half of the females, or 48 percent, found standing up and giving a speech, or even just talking to a group extremely difficult. Only 15 percent of the males reported this concern. More studies should be conducted to determine the prevalence of this discrepancy in other school settings.

Conclusions

The implications are significant if we want to help adult learners, especially adult women. They are in need of practical experience in the skills of speaking and communicating interpersonally in small groups in order to build their confidence. They may be products of the culture and classroom that has devalued their efforts, as reported in the American Association of University Women (AAUW) (1992) report How Schools Shortchange Girls: A Study of Major Findings on Girls and Education. And, the gender language differences that place women in powerless positions as described in numerous studies (Bozik, 1991; Lakoff, 1991; Miller, & Swift, 1976; Roszak, & Roszak, 1969) gain credibility.

In the introductory course, then it seems we should be more concerned with experiential activities that build practical competence than with studying theories of communication. The lecture, while it may fill in the gaps of knowledge from the readings, should not be the preferred style of teaching, and surely not the only method. We should not rely on a couple of oral performances to fulfill the speaking requirements. Both male and female students should have ample opportunity to engage in speech acts that further their learning both about communication and in communication. Women should be given the chance to lead discussions and to participate equally with males in small group discussions, skills, according to the AAUW report, they have lost out on in elementary and secondary school.

This survey, while limited, has significant implications for the school from which it was compiled. Other schools might reveal different results. Nevertheless, a similar survey of a school's population might profitably inform departments as they plan their programs to better meet the needs of adult and nontraditional students.

References

Apps, J. W. (1992). Adult education: The way to lifelong learning. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Apps, J. W. (1981). The adult learner on campus: A guide for instructors and administrators. Chicago: Follett.

Bozik, M. (1991). Who are those women and what are they saying? Women and Language.14(2), p. 48.

Brookfield, S. D. (1987). Developing critical thinkers: Changing adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Publishers.

Gabert, G. (1991). Community Colleges in the 1990s. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

How schools shortchange girls: A study of major findings on girls and education. (1992). American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.

Hutchins, R. H. (1961). The learning society. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Lakoff, R. (1991). You are what you say. In H. Knepler & M. Knepler (Eds.) Crossing cultures: Reading for composition. NY: MacMillan.

Miller, C. & Swift, K. (1976). Wjords and women. New York: ANchor Press/Doubleday.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). On becoming a person. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Roszak, B. & Roszak, T. (1969). Masculine/feminine: Readings in sexual mythology and the liberation of women. New York: Harper Colophon Books.

VOLUNTARY
NEEDS ASSESSMENT
FOR
ADULT AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

This survey is an effort to learn how the community college and speech/communication courses might better serve the needs of adult and nontraditional students. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. Thank you. Dr. Virginia O'Keefe

PLEASE WRITE IN YOUR ANSWERS OR CIRCLE THE BEST RESPONSE:

1. Age Group: Under 24 Over 24 Over 34 Over 44 Over 54

2. Sex: Female Male

3. Which category best describes your current living arrangements:
   1) live with a partner/spouse
   2) live with a partner/spouse and child(ren)
   3) live with parent(s)
   4) live with child(ren)
   5) live with friend(s)
   6) live alone

4. Number of courses currently taking at NOVA:
   1 2 3 4 5 6

5. Subjects currently taking at NOVA:

Accounting	Chemistry	Geography	Philosophy
Adm. Justice	Computers	History	PE
AC/Refrig.	Economics	Marketing	Psychology
Art	Electronics	Mathematics	Sociology
Biology	English	Music	Speech/Dr
Bus. Mgmnt.	Foreign	Office Sys.	Travel

6. Reason for taking speech/communication course:
   Required Personal Choice Other_____

7. Enrolled in a degree program? Yes No

8. If in a degree program, state your **Major** _____
   Minor _____

9. Circle response that best explains why you are in college:
   1) I have a degree; I am here to keep a competitive edge.
   2) I have some college; I am here to complete a degree.
   3) I have a high school diploma; I now want a degree to be able to get a good job.
   4) Classes are required by my employer
   5) I am not in college for any reason related to work; I am here for the joy of knowledge.
   6) Other (Please specify)_____

NEEDS ASSESSMENT
FOR
ADULT AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

10. If in a degree program, how much time do you estimate for completion?
1 semester 1 Year 2 Years 3 Years More

11. Do you plan to transfer to a four-year college or university?
Yes No

12. Before you took this course, how much time had elapsed since you had been a student?
0 - 3 Months 4 - 6 Months 7 - 12 Months
2 Years 3 Years _____ Years

Short answer portion. Please answer the following questions briefly.

13. What services of this college have been particularly helpful to you as a student?

14. How has this speech/communication course helped you toward your educational goals?

15. What kinds of knowledge or skills should be included in this speech/communication course to better aid you in your educational goals?

16. What aspects of this speech/communication course have been particularly difficult for you as a student?

17. In your opinion, what services, organizations, or activities could be improved to help adult and nontraditional students?